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13. — *Emily Chester. A Novel.* Boston: Ticknor and Fields. 1864. 16mo. pp. 367.

THIS book is so well-meaning, that we are deterred by a feeling of real consideration for its author from buying back, in the free expression of our regret at misused time, the several tedious hours we have spent over its pages. It is emphatically a dull work; and yet it is a work in which many persons might discern that arch-opponent of dullness, — a questionable moral tendency. It is almost, we think, a worthless book; and yet it is decidedly a serious one. Its composition has evidently been a great matter for the author.

This latter fact commands our sympathy and tempers our severity; and yet at the same time it arouses a strong feeling of melancholy. This is the age of conscientious poor books, as well as of unscrupulous clever ones; and we are often appalled at the quantity of ponderous literary matter which is kept afloat in the market by the simple fact that those who have set it afloat are persons of a well-meaning sort. When a book is both bad and clever, the critic who pulls it to pieces feels that the author has some consolation in the sweetness of his own wit for the acerbity of that of others. But when a book is destitute of even the excellence of a pleasant style, it is surrounded with an atmosphere of innocence and innocuousness which inspires the justly indignant reviewer with compassion for the hapless adventurer who has nothing to fall back upon.

We have called "*Emily Chester*" a dull book, because the author has chosen a subject and a manner alike certain to make it dull in any but the most skilful hands. She has told a story of character in a would-be psychological mode; not of every-day character, such as is employed by Mr. Trollope and Miss Austen, but of character which she must allow us to term exceptional. She has brought together three persons; for although in the latter part of the book other names occur with some frequency, they remain nothing but names; and during three hundred and fifty close pages, we are invited to watch the moral operations of this romantic trio. What a chance for dullness is here!

She has linked her three persons together by a simple dramatic mechanism. They are a husband, a wife, and a lover. *Emily Chester*, the wife, is a beautiful and accomplished young woman. When we have said this, we have said as much about her as we venture positively to assert; for any further acquaintance with her is the result of mere guess-work. Her person is minutely described. At eighteen she has a magnificently developed figure. We are told that she has a deep sense of the beautiful; we gather generally that she is good yet proud,—

with a stern Romanesque pride,—passionate yet cold, and although very calm and stately on all occasions, quite free from petty feminine affectations; that she is furthermore earnestly devoted to music, and addicted to quoting from the German. Is she clever? We know not. The author has evidently intended to make her very perfect, but she has only succeeded in making her very inane. She behaves on all occasions in a most irreproachable, inhuman manner; as if from the hour of her birth she had resolved to be a martyr, and was grimly determined not to be balked of her purpose. When anything particularly disagreeable happens, she becomes very pale and calm and statuesque. Although in the ordinary affairs of life she is sufficiently cheerful and voluble, whenever anything occurs a little out of the usual way she seems to remember the stake and the torture, and straightway becomes silent and cold and classical. She goes down into her grave after a life of acute misery without ever having “let on,” as the phrase is, that there has been anything particular the matter with her. In view of these facts, we presume that the author has aimed at the creation of a perfect woman,—a woman high-toned, high-spirited, high-souled, high-bred, high and mighty in all respects. Heaven preserve us from any more radical specimens of this perfection!

To wish to create such a specimen was a very laudable, but a very perilous ambition; to have created it, would have been an admirable achievement. But the task remains pretty much what it was. *Emily Chester* is not a character; she is a mere shadow; the mind’s eye strives in vain to body her forth from the fluent mass of talk in which she is embodied. We do not wish to be understood as attributing this fact of her indistinctness to the fact of her general excellence and nobleness; good women, thank heaven, may be as vividly realized as bad ones. We attribute it to the want of clearness in the author’s conception, to the want of science in her execution.

Max Crampton and Frederick Hastings, who are both very faulty persons, are equally incomplete and intangible. Max is an eccentric millionaire, a mute adorer of Miss Chester; mute, that is, with regard to his passion, but a great talker and theorizer on things in general. We have a strong impression of having met him before. He is the repetition of a type that has of late years obtained great favor with lady novelists: the ugly, rich, middle-aged lover, with stern brows and white teeth; reticent and yet ardent; indolent and yet muscular, full of satire and common-sense. Max is partly a German, as such men often are, in novels. In spite of these striking characteristics, his fine rich ugliness, his sardonic laugh, his enormous mental strength, the fulness of his devotion and of his magnanimity, he is anything but a living,

moving person. He is essentially a woman's man ; one of those impossible heroes, whom lady novelists concoct half out of their own erratic fancies and half out of those of other lady novelists. But if Max is a woman's man, what is Frederick Hastings? He is worse; he is almost a man's woman. He is nothing; he is more shadowy even than Emily. We are told that he had beauty and grace of person, delicacy, subtlety of mind, womanly quickness of perception. But, like his companions, he utterly fails to assert himself.

Such are the three mutually related individuals with whom we are brought into relation. We cannot but suppose that, as we have said, the author intended them for persons of exceptional endowments. Such beauty, such moral force and fervor, as are shadowed forth in Emily; so sublime and Gothic an ugliness, such intellectual depth, breadth, strength, so vast an intellectual and moral capacity generally, as we are taught to associate with Max: these traits are certainly not vouchsafed to the vulgar many. Nor is it given to one man out of five thousand, we apprehend, to be so consummate a charmer as Frederick Hastings.

But granting the existence of these almost unique persons, we recur to our statement that they are treated in a psychological fashion. We use this word, for want of a better one, in what we may call its technical sense. We apply it to the fact that the author makes the action of her story rest, not only exclusively, but what is more to the point, avowedly, upon the temperament, nature, constitution, instincts, of her characters; upon their physical rather than upon their moral sense. There is a novel at present languidly circulating in our literature — "Charles Auchester" — which is generally spoken of by its admirers as a "novel of temperament." "Emily Chester" is of the same sort; it is an attempt to exalt the physical sensibilities into the place of monitors and directors, or at any rate to endow them with supreme force and subtlety. Psychology, it may be said, is the observation of the moral and intellectual character. We repeat that we use the word in what we have called its technical sense, the scrutiny, in fiction, of *motive* generally. It is very common now-a-days for young novelists to build up figures *minus* the soul. There are two ways of so eliminating the spiritual principle. One is by effectually diluting it in the description of outward objects, as is the case with the picturesque school of writing; another is by diluting it in the description of internal subjects. This latter course has been pursued in the volume before us. In either case the temperament is the nearest approach we have to a soul. Emily becomes aware of Frederick Hastings's presence at Mrs. Dana's party by "a species of animal magnetism." Many writers would have said

by the use of her eyes. During the period of her grief at her father's death, Max feels that he is "constitutionally powerless" to help her. So he does not even try. As she regains her health, after her marriage, "her morbid sensitiveness to outward influences" returns with renewed vigor. Her old constitutional repulsion towards (*sic*) her husband increases with fearful rapidity. She tries in vain to overcome it: "the battle with, and denial of, instinct resulted as such conflicts inevitably must." The mood in which she drives him from her, in what may not be inappropriately termed the "balcony scene" on the Lake of Como, arises from her having been "true to her constitutional sensitiveness." Max recognizes the old friendship between his wife and Hastings to have been the "constitutional harmony of two congenial natures." Emily's spirit, on page 245, is bound by "human law with which its nature had no correspondence." We are told on page 285, that Frederick Hastings held Emily fascinated by his "motive power over the supersensuous portion of her being."

But it is needless to multiply examples. There is hardly a page in which the author does not insinuate her conviction that, in proportion as a person is finely organized, in so far as he is apt to be the slave of his instincts, — the subject of unaccountable attractions and repulsions, loathings and yearnings. We do not wish to use hard words; perhaps, indeed, the word which is in our mind, and which will be on the lips of many, is in these latter days no longer a hard word; but if "Emily Chester" is immoral, it is by the fact of the above false representation. It is not in making a woman prefer another man to her husband, nor even in making her detest a kind and virtuous husband. It is in showing her to be so disposed without an assignable reason; it is in making her irresponsible. But the absurdity of such a view of human nature nullifies its pernicious tendency. Beasts and idiots act from their instincts; educated men and women, even when they most violate principle, act from their reason, however perverted, and their affections, however misplaced.

We presume that our author wishes us to admire, or at least to compassionate, her heroine; but we must deny her the tribute of either sentiment. It may be claimed for her that she was ultimately victorious over her lawless impulses; but this claim we reject. Passion was indeed conquered by duty, but life was conquered by passion. The true victory of mind would have been, not perhaps in a happy, but at least in a peaceful life. Granting the possibility of Emily's having been beset by these vague and nameless conflicting forces, the one course open to her was to conquer a peace. Women who love less wisely than well engage our sympathy even while we deny them our appro-

bation; but a woman who indulges in a foolish passion, without even the excuse of loving well, must be curtly and sternly dismissed. At no period of Emily's history could she have assigned a reason to herself (let alone her disability to make her position clear to her husband) for her intense loathing of Max Crampton! We do not say that she could not have defended her position; she could not have even indicated it. Nor could she have given a name to the state of her feelings with regard to Hastings. She admits to herself that he does not engage her heart; he dominates merely "the supersensuous portion of her being." We hope that this glittering generality was not of Emily's own contrivance. Sore distressed indeed must she have been, if she could not have made herself out a better case than her biographer has made for her. If her biographer had represented her as *loving* Frederick Hastings, as struggling with her love, and finally reducing it from a disorderly to an orderly passion, we should have pledged her our fullest sympathy and interest. Having done so well, we might have regretted that she should not have done better, and have continued to adorn that fashionable society of which she was so brilliant a member. She was in truth supremely handsome; she might have lived for her beauty's sake. But others have done so much worse, that we should have been sorry to complain. As the case stands, we complain bitterly, not so much of Emily as of the author; for we are satisfied that an Emily is impossible. Even from the author's point of view, however, her case is an easy one. She had no hate to contend with, merely loathing; no love, merely yearning; no feelings, as far as we can make out, merely sensations. Except the loss of her property, we maintain that she has no deep sorrow in life. She refuses Hastings in the season of her trial. Good: she would not marry a man whom she did not love, merely for a subsistence; so far she was an honest woman. But she refuses him at the cost of a great agony. We do not understand her predicament. It is our belief that there is no serious middle state between friendship and love. If Emily did not love Hastings, why should she have suffered so intensely in refusing him? Certainly not out of sympathy for him disappointed. We may be told that she did not love him in a way to marry him: she loved him, then, as a mother or a sister. The refusal of his hand must have been, in such a case, an easy rather than a difficult task. She accepts Max as irresponsibly as she refuses Frederick,—because there is a look in his eyes of claiming her body and soul, "through his divine right of the stronger." Such a look must be either very brutal or very tender. What we know of Max forbids us to suppose that in his case it was tainted with the former element; it must accordingly have expressed the ripened will to serve, cherish,

and protect. Why, then, should it in later years, as Emily looked back upon it, have filled her with so grisly a horror? Such terrors are self-made. A woman who despises her husband's person may perhaps, if she is very weak and nervous, grow to invest it with numerous fantastic analogies. If, on the contrary, she is as admirably self-poised as Mrs. Crampton, she will endeavor, by the steady contemplation of his magnificent intellect and his generous devotion, to discern the subtle halo (always discernible to the eye of belief) which a noble soul sheds through an ignoble body. Our author will perhaps resent our insinuation that the unutterable loathing of Max's wife's for him was anything so easily disposed of as a contempt for his person. Such a feeling is a very lawful one; it may easily be an impediment to a wife's happiness; but when it is balanced by so deep a conviction of her partner's moral and intellectual integrity as Mrs. Crampton's own mental acuteness furnished her, it is certainly not an insuperable bar to a career of comfortable resignation. When it assumes the unnatural proportions in which it is here exhibited, it conclusively proves that its subject is a profoundly vicious person. Emily found just that in Hastings which she missed in her husband. If the absence of this quality in Max was sufficient to unfit him for her true love, why should not its presence have been potent enough to insure her heart to Frederick? We doubt very much whether she had a heart; we mistrust those hearts which are known only by their ineffable emptiness and woe. But taking her biographer's word for it that she had, the above little piece of logic ought, we think, effectually to confound it. Heart-histories, as they are called, have generally been considered a very weary and unprofitable species of fiction; but we infinitely prefer the old-fashioned love-stories, in which no love but heart-love was recognized, to these modern teachings of a vagrant passion which has neither a name nor a habitation. We are not particularly fond of any kind of sentimentality; but Heaven defend us from the sentimentality which soars above all our old superstitions, and allies itself with anything so rational as a theory.

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- 14.—1. *Eliana: being the hitherto Uncollected Writings of CHARLES LAMB*. Boston: William Veazie. 1864. 16mo. pp. 437.  
2. *The Seer; or, Common-Places Refreshed*. By LEIGH HUNT. 1864. 2 vols. 16mo. pp. 334, 290.

It is not difficult to explain the wide-spread popularity of Charles Lamb's writings, in spite of the disadvantageous circumstances under which they were composed, and the obvious limitations of his genius.